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Superintendent's address, 11/6/02

Address by Superintendent Kay Donovan

to the Special Town Meeting, Nov. 6, 2002

Good Evening! I have agonized about what to say tonight and how to say it so that you would understand the problem we have, the corrections needed, and the requisite zeal to provide answers. I have proudly served as your superintendent for over 8 years. Together we have accomplished much – together we have come so far – together we can solve this problem, too. But I am truly frightened for our children, for ourselves, and for the Arlington we have known and loved.

The problem is not the fault of our employees, our teachers, our students, or our town. Our ability to pay is being squeezed, and our needs are increasing. This problem has been thrust upon us and requires our united response.

As many of you know, I love to quote historians during their turbulent moments because I believe so much of what they say. Tonight I think of Winston Churchill's statement that the "price of greatness is responsibility." Arlington's greatness exists in its ability to work together for the greater good. In my mind, the greater good is in the education and love of its youth. That is why I am here tonight – because this belief is embedded in why and how I lead your school system.

In the Strategic plan we authored together, we dedicated our efforts, resources, and time as a community to providing high quality education by believing that all students could be successful learners maximizing their talents, fulfilling their academic potential, mastering skills demanded by society, and becoming inquiring participants at their own pace. We established high standards in achievement, fairness, honesty, and respect for one another.

Today I stood 10 feet tall when the chair of the accreditation team which is visiting Arlington High School this week told us that they stood in awe of our students and staff and the respect they showed to one another. Providing a safe environment, secure and well maintained for all of our children is what we worked and provided together. Our well-thought-out vision stated and I quote: "Our entire citizenry will be equal partners in creating a vibrant school community." This strategic-planning process has been a success story for Arlington. It is why we are all here.

Enter the national dislocation from 9/11, the major downturn in our economy, and the enormity of the resultant stress upon our nation, Commonwealth and Town. You have heard from many town officials of the fiscal realities that we must face. Now let me tell you how our schools will look if we do not work together, but how life can look (even in hard times) if we look for solutions, work together, make legitimate reductions in present services, and ask for help for the rest, so that our Town of Arlington may remain the vibrant community that we presently enjoy.

Included in our proposed educational budgets for 2004-2005 and 2006 are level-funded

staffing, funds for fiscally responsible collective-bargaining packages, mandated step raises, mandated special-education tuitions and transportation, increased energy expectations, and a small contingency for school council goals. Because state and federal aid and grants will be cut dramatically, and local fixed costs rise, there will be a need to reduce budgets below present levels and participate in an operating override.

You have seen in your Finance Committee report and its appendix that the anticipated shortfall, or more appropriately called "largefall," is the difference of \$8 million. If the schools are approximately 50 percent [of that] – we are at least looking at a \$4-million reduction. Because our budgets are labor-intensive, we can all divide \$4 million by an average salary of \$35,000 and realize that our schools would have a loss of over 100 in personnel, without some financial relief.

What would this school look like? To begin, the parent, student and staff expectations would not be met as they are today. There would be cuts in administration, curriculum, instruction, and assessment areas. Specialized services would be reduced: music, drama, nurses, guidance, psychologists, library services, technology, clerical, physical education, personnel, and traffic supervisors, maintenance and custodial services.

For every three staff members let go, another one would have to be let go to pay the unemployment costs of the 4. With the new MCAS graduation requirement, any residential special education student who does not pass is entitled to 4 more years of tuition payments until the student is 22. That is adding a substantial financial burden on our community.

Without our collective commitment to work toward financial stabilization, our schools will look very different. I worry about the stability of our energized intelligent teachers who presently are role models for our students. Fear of major job loss encourages experienced staff to seek alternative employment. It doesn't take long for the major educational strides we have made to disappear from sight. It is very hard to reinstate programs – if ever!!

A few years ago I described the human face of a child entering a newly constructed school embraced by caring and competent teachers sharing and coaching them in preparation for a future of options, promise and preparedness for a lifetime of achievement in a complex society. We are so far along on this road to our children's future. The next generations deserve no less. Let us work together along this road, it may be bumpy, but we can make it happen.

As I said to the "greatest generation" when they received their diplomas [in 2000]. You took your responsibility for the next generation seriously. We should do no less. The price of greatness is responsibility.